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Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

Editorial In(ter)ference: Errata and Aporia in *Lolita*

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Editorial In(ter)ference: Errata and Aporia in *Lolita*

Bruce Stone

Adducing error

To Charlotte, I said that society columns *should* contain a shimmer of errors. (75)¹

- 1 As Brian Boyd notes in *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, the first sentence of Nabokov's 1962 novel contains a joke, the upshot of which is lost on both the novel's narrator, Charles Kinbote, and, according to Boyd, a good number of graduate students. Of course, the joke in question surfaces in the Foreword, when Kinbote describes Shade's work as "a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines" (*Pale Fire* 13) but fails to account for the numerical incompatibility of these descriptors (by definition, couplets come in even numbers) (Boyd 2001, 17). The sentence has the effect of a malapropism, which immediately conveys, if not a daftness, then a troubling deafness on the part of the speaker; Kinbote's account of the poem and the tragedy surrounding its composition seems strangely askew from the very start. Surprisingly, when Nabokov employed this opening gambit in *Pale Fire*, it might have been his *second* time experimenting with the device: *Lolita*, I would argue, begins in nearly identical fashion.
- 2 The first sentence of John Ray's Foreword reads: "*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male, 'such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it preambulates'*" (3). The sentence is engineered for comedy, of course, and captures exactly the right note of pomposity (disguised as self-effacement) for this parody of a Foreword. But while the sentence contains numerous stylistic peculiarities—the strained syntax, the dubious reference to "two titles" (is there not only one title, with two parts?), the too-precious and antiquated verb "preambulates"—the comical impropriety hinges on the humble pronoun "it", which has an ambiguous referent. Ostensibly, the intended referent is "present note", but this antecedent is the object of a preposition, while the pronoun fills a subject slot in the sentence's concluding clause. This grammatical asymmetry can breed confusion in pronoun reference, particularly

when there are multiple potential antecedents available to choose from. And here, the pronoun might direct readers to look for an antecedent that similarly occupies a subject position in the sentence: the phrase “two titles” supplies a possible candidate, given its status as a subject complement. With this (mis)reading, we would be left with a conspicuous error in pronoun agreement (the plural antecedent “titles” would require the plural pronoun “they”). But even if we want to object that “two titles” can't possibly be the antecedent here, we have to surmount the confusion that both terms —“two titles” and “present note”—might be said to “preamble” Humbert's manuscript (in the sense of “to walk before”, if not “to preamble”), and thus, both might reasonably serve as the antecedent. The grammar of the sentence creates the potential for this equivocation in its meaning, which is exactly the problem.

- 3 Of course, this grammatical inelegance only becomes malapropian in context; in the very next paragraph, Ray assures readers that he has corrected the “*obvious solecisms*” in Humbert's text (3), yet under scrutiny, his own first sentence belies the claim.
- 4 In *Lolita*, the opening one-liner might be more problematic, less determinate, than the one in *Pale Fire*. If this error is more than chimerical—a joke planted intentionally by Nabokov—it remains devilishly subtle. However, in *Lolita*, the initial blunder is only the first in a series of grammatical errors strewn throughout the novel. At the end of this paper is a list of *Lolita*'s errata, a total of thirty-one miscellaneous textual errors (plus two related stylistic anomalies) that have persisted through the book's multiple printings. The list begs the question of how to define error in a text like *Lolita*, the manuscript confession of a second-language speaker with a virtuosic, if eccentric, brand of English—a manuscript, moreover, that comes equipped with a built-in copy-editor among the novel's cast of characters. Further, given the nature of these errors, which frequently involve articles and faulty prepositions, two problems typical of non-native speakers, readers are left with an especially disconcerting question: which of these errors belong to Humbert and/or Ray (intentional flaws in the text, signifying Ray's carelessness and incompetence as an editor) and which belong to Nabokov, who at the time had been working for roughly a decade as an English-language novelist?
- 5 Some disclaimers are necessary at the outset. First, in the course of tallying the errors, I had to allow for the archaic constructions that Humbert favors and, of course, to distinguish between poetic license, stylistic preference and editorial oversight in matters of punctuation. For example, Nabokov seems to prefer a comma for inverted sentences: “Still more disquieting than all these conjectures and worries, was the fact that Humbert Humbert [...]” (105). (The necessity of this comma is debatable.) Secondly, in many cases, the errors are so negligible as to have almost no perceptible impact on the novel's meaning and effect. Consequently, the compilation of this list might be at best a cosmetic exercise, a matter of textual housekeeping (no small thing, perhaps, for one of the greatest novels of the 20th century). And yet, in the end it might not be possible to separate, unexceptionably, the legitimate mistakes that bear correcting from the mirages, the glitches intended to simulate Humbert's pidgin-inflected English. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the list, in its totality, if not its particulars, must have some bearing on one of the thorniest debates in Nabokov studies: the dating of Humbert's manuscript confession—a controversy that hinges essentially on a typo—and the boundaries of the real in the novel.
- 6 If the errors below belong to Nabokov, then we certainly have a very convenient resolution for the problem of the novel's tangled chronology. It follows that the

infamous errors in the dating of Humbert's confession—which don't allow him sufficient time to meet Lolita in Coalmont and murder Quilty in (or near) Parkington—are, like the numerous solecisms that survive in the manuscript, oversights: hardly evidence on which to question the ontological status of the novel's culminating scenes. In essence, the very existence of the text's errata lends weight to the position that Brian Boyd takes in “Even Homais Nods”: Nabokov, for all his wondrous gifts, was error-prone. Case closed. At the novel's end, Humbert does not remain at large, nor does he compose his confession from an undisclosed New York location as, for example, Alexander Dolinin has claimed (Dolinin 39). Instead, he dies “*in legal captivity*” while awaiting trial, as Ray tells us (3).

- 7 But rather than attributing the errors to Nabokov's editorial absent-mindedness, another way to deal with the text's errata is to attribute the errors to Nabokov's *characters*, Humbert and especially Ray, the self-described manuscript editor. This is essentially what George Ferger does in his 2004 article in *Nabokov Studies*; he writes, “it is hardly a leap to suppose that Nabokov deliberately created the discrepancy in the dates and other 'solecisms' to attract the careful reader's attention and provoke investigation” (Ferger 195). Ferger doesn't identify very many of those “other 'solecisms'”, but for him, the discrepant dates stand as a representative (and singularly important) instance of a pattern within which the errors serve as a signaling device: they alert readers to Ray's intrusive editorial presence in Humbert's narrative. According to Ferger, Ray is the one responsible for the humiliations that Humbert experiences (the thunderstorm between Coalmont and Ramsdale, the erectile dysfunction of Chum at Pavor Manor). Ray also gets credit for simulating Humbert's “moral apotheosis” at the novel's end (Ferger 191-192), but he seems primarily to be occupied with inscribing his name anagrammatically into key passages in the text—those “subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted”, according to Nabokov's Afterword (316)—leaving behind a trail of “shadowgraphs” for readers to track. For now, suffice it to say that, in Ferger's reading, the chronological error becomes integral to, rather than anomalous within, the novel's diabolical artistry. Boyd anticipates this interpretation, and preemptively rebuts it, in his 1995 article. He writes, “both the professionalization of criticism and the prestige of [Nabokov as an] author have encouraged critics to adopt as an article of faith that he soars above error”, a view which inclines critics to “resurrect as virtues [...] what had once seemed defects” in the works (Boyd 1995). Boyd clearly rejects the wisdom of these hermeneutic assumptions and moves. Perhaps it's surprising, then, that Ferger arrives at a conclusion very similar to Boyd's with regard to the novel's last nine chapters. Although Ferger argues that “the principal narrator of the concluding chapters of *Lolita*” is John Ray, Jr. (Ferger 139), he nevertheless concludes, as does Boyd, that the existential status of the scenes in Coalmont and Pavor Manor need not be disputed: those pivotal events *happen*, for Humbert, Lo, Quilty and the reader.
- 8 In some ways, Boyd and Ferger are unlikely allies in this debate. As Ferger dramatically elevates Ray's status in the text—promoting the character from psychologist to the “surgeon of genius” (Ferger 141) Humbert imagines at the close of his confession, and also suggesting that Ray is an emissary of Quilty (Ferger 137-138)—he has more in common with the Boyd of *Nabokov's Pale Fire*—which traces the spectral influence of Hazel Shade on that novel's events—than with the Boyd of “Even Homais Nods”. Still, Ferger offers some inadvertent support to further strengthen Boyd's conclusions about *Lolita*. In a footnote, Ferger discusses a second chronological anomaly in the text; in the

Foreword, dated 5 August 1955, Ray claims that Louise Windmuller is “a college sophomore”, while Humbert learns from her father that Louise has started college in September of 1952. As Ferger explains, Louise would have to be taking an inordinately long time to advance in her course work to be a sophomore in the fall of 1955. Ferger is quick to defend the error as essential to the text's meaning, as it reinforces his position with regard to the incompatible dates: such errors alert readers that something is amiss in the text, and this signaling device leads to the discovery of Ray's shadowgraphic role in Humbert's story (Ferger 150). However, Boyd would likely concur with Tadashi Wakashima's sensible account of this anomaly in a paper available on *Zembla*. In this reading, the botched dates are a by-product of the novel's significantly delayed publication. Wakashima notes that Louise would have been a sophomore in late 1953, when Nabokov was finishing the novel. However, because it took Nabokov roughly a year to find a publisher, and because the date was not appended to the Foreword until much later, with the 1970 printing of *The Annotated Lolita*, Wakashima hypothesizes that Nabokov added the date, in an effort to link the novel's world to the reader's, and simply overlooked the logistical tangle that resulted (Wakashima).

- 9 Ferger's argument, as Boyd predicted, would make a virtue of an apparent flaw in the novel. But Ferger's point—that the Foreword's errant date is part of an intelligible *pattern* of mistakes—stubbornly remains, not to be dismissed. Wakashima allows for this possibility too; he wonders if “the time lag [...] is not an oversight of Nabokov's, but deliberate artifice”, and is content to leave the problem unresolved (Wakashima). With regard to *Lolita*'s grammatical errata, a similar ambiguity remains. However, given the greater number of instances, the varied types and varying importance of the errors, a middle-ground position presents itself more readily here. In the list below, eight of the thirty-one errors (noted with an asterisk) might reasonably be corrected to shore up, without compromising, the novel's typographical integrity—just as an irregular spelling of the word *banisters* was corrected (from “bannisters” on page 57 of *The Annotated Lolita*) for the Everyman's edition (60). The remaining twenty-three errors seem better left undisturbed as they contribute in essential ways to the portraits of Humbert as a stylist and of Ray as an editor, thus altering profoundly our experience of the novel.

Losing Lolita

Viewing the past graphically, I see our romance engulfed in a deep valley of mist between the crags of two matter-of-fact mountains: life had been real before, life will be real from now on, I hope. Not tomorrow, though. Perhaps after tomorrow.
 (“That in Aleppo Once...” 567-68)

- 10 Even if we concede that the novel's errata, and particularly the date of Ray's Foreword, might be irresolvably ambiguous, that readers can reasonably disagree about how to parse these textual features, the debate over the novel's chronology does not necessarily have to end in stalemate. There is, I would argue, overwhelming evidence to counter the conclusions of both Boyd and Ferger, confirming (unevenly) the positions of Alexander Dolinin, Julian Connolly, Anthony Moore and their predecessors, Elizabeth Bruss, Christina Tekiner and Leona Toker: namely, the novel's last nine chapters are at least partly bogus, and the discrepancy in the novel's dates points the way toward this discovery. Humbert's repeated attempts to establish the chronology of the novel's

events; the forceful, if counterintuitive, nudge that Humbert's "calendar is getting confused" (109); and details like the piercing double-entendre in the speech of Headmistress Pratt at Beardsley—"Dolly will presently enter an age group where [sic] dates, dating, date dress, date book, date etiquette, mean as much to her as business" concerns mean to most adults (177)—all serve to articulate what Humbert is unable to state explicitly: the dates in the novel warrant close inspection, and they serve as one of those mechanisms that point reliably to the divergence of the real and the illusory.

- 11 Toker, Dolinin, Connolly, and Moore sketch the abundant textual evidence that supports this position. Toker shows how the later editions of the novel, particularly the Russian translation, make the faulty chronology more pronounced than it is in the 1958 English version (Toker 210). Dolinin documents the precision of Humbert's time-keeping in the novel's Part Two (Dolinin 30), and he supplies further evidence of Humbert's predisposition for fabulation, noting that Humbert's Arctic exploits and his ludicrous account of his first wife's fate (on all fours, in a West-coast psychological experiment) are particularly "unbelievable" (Dolinin 26). Connolly and Moore, like Christina Tekiner before them, show how the scene depicting Quilty's murder at Pavor Manor especially invites this kind of skepticism. While Connolly emphasizes the way in which the scene is built of prefabricated materials, evoking correspondences with other scenes and motifs in the novel, Moore further points out illogical details in Humbert's description of the murder itself: for example, as Quilty ascends a staircase, under fire, Humbert presumes to describe his victim's facial expression (Moore 79). None of these writers explicitly mentions Humbert's description of himself pogoing across the room—"I see myself following [Quilty] through the hall, with a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump, remaining quite straight on straight legs while bouncing up twice in his wake" (303)—but beyond the surreality of the local details in Pavor Manor, the evidence of Humbert's penchant for fabrication, as Dolinin and Connolly suggest, is dispersed much more broadly throughout the novel, extending to include more and more of its structure.
- 12 In this regard, one particularly revealing passage surfaces in Chapter 19 of Part One. As Humbert chronicles the brief period of his marriage to Charlotte Haze, he emphasizes one of his doomed wife's quirks. She asks Humbert to inventory his former liaisons and, in order to assuage her jealousy, to make a final renunciation of the same. But owing to the criminality of Humbert's true tastes and experiences, he is forced to trot out for her review a sequence of imaginary girlfriends:

She made me tell her about my marriage to Valeria, who was of course a scream; but I also had to invent, or to pad atrociously, a long series of mistresses for Charlotte's morbid delectation... I presented my women, and had them smile and sway—the languorous blonde, the fiery brunette, the sensual copperhead—as if on parade in a bordello. (80)
- 13 Dolinin mentions this passage in passing; however, this seemingly incidental disclosure is crucial because it resonates powerfully with the novel's macro-narrative design.
- 14 First, it's worth noting that Humbert has a conversation with Lolita, at The Enchanted Hunters, that is eerily similar to the one he had with Charlotte. He asks Lolita about her previous sexual experiences, and she divulges her lesbian experimentation with Elizabeth Talbot, glosses the widespread promiscuity of Ramsdale's youth, and also supplies the details of her callisthenic intercourse with Charlie Holmes, the resident stud at Camp Q.—all of which Humbert seems to accept without question. The reader

might be wiser to view this account with suspicion; Humbert might well be inventing Lo's experience in an effort to mitigate the extent of his own crime: "Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover", he claims (135). Further, as Jacqueline Hamrit has observed, women—and, more specifically, Humbert's sexual partners—serve as a kind of structural principle in the text. From Annabel, Valeria and Charlotte to Lolita, Rita and Lolita again (plus the lesser lights of Humbert's Parisian prostitute, Monique, and Dr. Anita Johnson of the Arctic expedition), "female figures", in Hamrit's words, "punctuate the unfolding of events and create a pattern of repetitions and substitutions" (Hamrit). Given Humbert's history of inventing romances for Charlotte and possibly Lolita, the question arises once again whether he is not likewise padding atrociously this structural list of liaisons for the morbid delectation of his readers. In the correspondence between local detail and structural scheme, we are clearly invited, and even directed, to question the limits of reality in the work as a whole.

- 15 Of course, even a loose-constructionist reading of the novel must center on this theme, as Humbert's Lolita, and the very taxonomic category of the nymphet, is an imaginary construct, a distortion, a triumph over and travesty of the real. In "Even Homais Nods", Boyd notes the pervasiveness of this theme as evidence that *undermines* the argument of the opposing camp (he calls members of this camp "revisionists", though *illusionists* might be a better term): he writes, "the revisionists simply ignore the element of fantasy that surrounds almost *every* scene in *Lolita*" (Boyd 1995). To illustrate his point, he mentions Humbert's conduct at the Elphinstone hospital, after Lolita has made her escape, which is just as ludicrous as the scene in Pavor Manor:

I found myself in the reception room, trying to beat up the doctor, and roaring at people under chairs, and clamoring for Mary who luckily for her was not there; rough hands plucked at my dressing gown, ripping off a pocket, and somehow I seem to have been sitting on a bald brown-headed patient, whom I had mistaken for Doctor Blue. (246)

- 16 In both scenes, reality appears to withdraw, supplanted by surreality, and in both cases, Boyd would note, Humbert has been drinking heavily. Conversely, Boyd might bridle at the thought that both scenes are fabrications, twice fictional: lies and/or embellishments within the fabric of a novel that is already fictional.
- 17 What's at issue here is of course the fundamental question that all readers of *Lolita* must ask: how far does this theme of the contest between reality and fantasy run in the novel? Should we question only the matter of Humbert's perception of Lo (and Charlotte, Valeria, Rita, et al.), or does the book invite us to question the veracity of Humbert's confession in the more thoroughgoing manner that the illusionist critics (and, in his own way, George Ferger) recommend? Put another way, where is the real in the text? How much of the narrative exists only in Humbert's imagination?
- 18 For Moore, and for a good number of critics, this narrative erasure extends so far at least to include the character of Quilty, from first to last: in Moore's words, Humbert "imagines his visit to a married pregnant Dolores [...] and then conjures the murder that did not happen *of a man who never existed*" (Moore 77, emphasis mine). It's possible to argue that this ontological erosion consumes increasingly large swaths of the novel. However, I will ultimately argue that *some* of the events in the novel's concluding chapters are factually reliable: the outlines of a "real" do seem to emerge in the novel, and John Ray's Foreword has the crucial function of establishing these boundaries. But before we proceed, it seems necessary—given Ferger's claim that "Boyd appears to have

had the last word” (Ferber 139) in the debate, and given the vehemence with which Boyd dismisses the illusionist reading—to add further evidence to confirm that the novel strategically and purposefully invites this reading at all. This evidence surfaces in the striking connections between the novel and Nabokov’s 1943 short story “That in Aleppo Once...”.

- 19 In the story an émigré poet, fleeing war-torn Europe, arrives in America, having been separated (poignantly and tragically) from his wife in transit, and the poet’s response to his wife’s disappearance corresponds pointedly with the novel’s action in Part Two, beginning with Lo’s infidelity and escape and including Humbert’s search for her (in the section that he christens “*Dolorès Disparue*” (253)). Much as Humbert’s manuscript comes equipped with an outsider’s perspective (Ray’s, in his Foreword), the story contains a similar configuration of narrational vantage points. It poses, formally, as a letter addressed to the writer/narrator’s friend, also a writer (of fiction), identified only by the initial V., and, like Ray, V. supplies a perspective on the text’s events beyond the narrator’s own consciousness.² The purpose of the letter is stated succinctly in the story’s first few paragraphs: to verify the writer’s paradoxical claim that “[a]lthough [he] can produce documentary proofs of matrimony, [he is] positive now that [his] wife never existed” (“That in Aleppo Once...” 560). The premise of the story, its very plot, centers on the apprehension of the real. Each one of the wife’s appearances (she is never named in the text), every report of her whereabouts, invites suspicion and is infected with doubt. The story seems to want less to suspend than to exacerbate the reader’s disbelief.
- 20 Perhaps the most prominent correspondence between the two works involves the blunt fact of the heroine’s disappearance, and the shifting versions of the story she supplies to explain her absence. In *Lolita*, one such moment arrives at the post office in Wace. While Humbert reads a letter intended for Lolita, from her friend Mona Dahl, Lolita slips out the post office door, presumably for a rendezvous with Quilty. Later, as Humbert interrogates Lo regarding her whereabouts, she lies, claiming to have run into a girl friend from Beardsley and to have gone for a soda at a drugstore. By degrees, Humbert manages to coerce something approaching the truth from Lolita—her companion wasn’t a girl he would know from school, they didn’t go for a soda and instead just “looked at dresses in show windows” (225). In short, she supplies a story that can’t be empirically verified.
- 21 This revision of a cover story has its counterpart in “Aleppo”. Unlike *Lolita*, the “Aleppo” narrator’s wife disappears unintentionally: she vanishes along with the train on which she and her husband were travelling when the latter debarks in search of food. In the chaos of the war, when travel involved “waiting for unscheduled trains bound for unknown destinations” (“That in Aleppo Once...” 562), the narrator has no rational means of locating his missing wife; the war-time bureaucracy proves to be a grotesque farce. Eventually, the wife materializes serendipitously, bumping into the narrator in a rations line, much as Lolita returns to Humbert on the street in Wace. In “Aleppo”, the poet’s wife initially explains her absence with a flimsy story in which she “spent the night in a bicycle shop with no bicycles, on the floor, together with three elderly women”, and from there, “traveled to a town the name of which she could not remember” before meeting up with her husband in Nice (“That in Aleppo Once...” 564). This story she later revises, saying that, instead, she “stayed for several nights in Montpellier with a brute of a man [she] met on the train. [She] did not want it at all. He

sold hair lotions” (“That in Aleppo Once...” 564). As with *Lolita*, the poet's wife (who is herself modeled after the young mistress of a poet—Pushkin, not the Poe of *Lolita*) disappears again, this time disseminating a story in which the narrator is a raging cuckold, and she the intended of a French aristocrat. This revised story reaches the writer/narrator through friends in the Russian expatriate community. It's Humbert who seems to best describe the heroines' narrational unreliability when he says of *Lolita*'s “leisure” activities in Beardsley, “there would constantly occur unaccounted-for time leaks with over-elaborate explanations to stop them up in retrospect” (186): a line that might point equally to the discrepant dates in the novel. Ultimately, these narrative equivocations unhinge the male protagonists, although both Humbert and the “Aleppo” narrator seem more devastated by the prospect of infidelity than by the larger condition of existential uncertainty—as if they have reconciled themselves, as good artists would, to the notion that the real is fluid, or in flux. As Humbert puts it at one point, “I was merely losing contact with reality” (255). It's also worth noting here that the heroines' talents for concocting stories might in fact serve as an analogue of the protagonists' own capacities for invention.

- 22 Besides the similarities in the evasive heroines, another, perhaps minor, correspondence emerges between the texts with regard to their peripheral characters and their respective roles in validating knowledge of the real. In “Aleppo”, when the narrator learns of the last incomprehensible turn in his wife's storytelling, which appears to lack any basis in reality, he gives up on her entirely, resolving to travel alone to New York. On the ship, he meets a man—“a doctor”, he says (“That in Aleppo Once...” 567), though he notes that this occupation has become a cliché in this context, a writer's ruse to make the character and the information he supplies respectable and plausible; this doctor claims to have seen the narrator's wife on the docks, waiting for her husband to arrive “with bag and tickets” (“That in Aleppo Once...” 567). A specious doctor plays a similar role in *Lolita* as well. In order to confirm his account of Valeria and Maximovich's fate in the ludicrous research study in California, Humbert claims to have learned this information from a “doctor” (30); however, he seems to reveal the true identity of his informant later in the novel, when he describes the “elderly, but still repulsively handsome White Russian, a baron they said [...] who had known in California good old Maximovich and Valeria” (155). Presumably, a baron, for Humbert, is an even more credible source than a doctor. Clearly, Humbert embraces naively the literary cliché that his counterpart derides, but in both cases the informant's equivocal occupation compromises the veracity of the narrator's story.
- 23 Humbert shares something else in common with his counterpart in “Aleppo”. When their respective beloveds disappear, both men enlist the services of detectives to help locate the missing persons. Humbert's agent pursues the case well after Humbert dismisses him, and suddenly materializes to supply the nonsensical information that “an eighty-year old Indian by the name of Bill Brown lived near Dolores, Colo.” (253)—presuming to explain one detail of Humbert's “cryptogrammic paper chase” (250) in pursuit of Quilty, but really explaining nothing. Likewise in “Aleppo”, the professionals are of no help to the narrator; an “indolent plainclothesman” (“That in Aleppo Once...” 563) claims to have found the narrator's wife, but the reunion scene runs as follows:

The girl he produced was a complete stranger, of course; but my friend Holmes kept on trying for some time to make her and me confess we were married, while her

taciturn and muscular bedfellow stood by and listened, his bare arms crossed on his striped chest. ("That in Aleppo Once..." 563)

- 24 As the protagonists of both texts hire agents to help resolve their respective mysteries and supply firm answers, these peripheral characters, like the physicians discussed above, function essentially as reifying agents, and are just as unhelpful. The answers these characters supply prove to be non sequiturs, narrational dead-ends.
- 25 There are numerous additional echoes between the story and the novel, but the last we will consider here involves the places, the edifices themselves, on which the action pivots. In the novel, when Humbert reaches Lolita in Coalmont, she tells him of her time at Quilty's Duk Duk Ranch—a promising evidentiary proof of Q's existence—but unfortunately, the place had burned to the ground so that "nothing remained, just a charred heap of rubbish" (277). Of course, this destruction itself echoes a similar event earlier in *Lolita*, when the McCoo house likewise burns, precipitating Humbert's arrival in the Haze home. In "Aleppo", the building in question is the residence of a family relative, the uncle of the narrator's wife. As the couple tries to initiate their emigration to the States, they write this uncle at his New York address but receive no reply. Near the end of the story, after the writer/narrator concludes that his wife "had never existed at all" ("That in Aleppo Once..." 567), he arrives in New York where he "hastened to satisfy a certain morbid curiosity" ("That in Aleppo Once..." 567). He continues:

I went to the address she had given me once; it proved to be an anonymous gap between two office buildings; I looked for her uncle's name in the directory; it wasn't there; I made some inquiries, and Gekko, who knows everything, informed me that the man and his horsey wife existed all right, but had moved to San Francisco after their deaf little girl had died. ("That in Aleppo Once..." 567)

- 26 This evidentiary coda apparently does nothing to alter the narrator's conviction that his wife is imaginary.
- 27 In both texts, readers are presented systematically with a conundrum: the evidence that promises to confirm the putative reality of the narrators' experiences only serves to confuse more thoroughly the notions of the illusive and the real. Instead of answers, we are left with aporias. For now, I simply want to assert what seems undeniable: clearly, a significant number of motifs and maneuvers from "Aleppo" have been recycled and repurposed for duty in *Lolita*. And these correspondences suggest that the basic premise of "Aleppo", to radically destabilize the reality of the narrative, persists in *Lolita*. It bears remembering here that Nabokov himself first titled his memoir "Conclusive Evidence", by which he meant to suggest that the text offered "conclusive evidence of [his] having existed" (*Speak Memory* 11). The comparisons with "Aleppo" seem to me to prove conclusively that this theme is deeply embedded in the novel—that Humbert's record of his experience is everywhere subject to doubt, even to the point of nullification. Thus, the problem with the dating of Humbert's manuscript is certainly apropos here, if not indisputably an articulation of the theme.
- 28 But just as "Aleppo" confirms for us the conundrum of *Lolita*'s textual reality, it might also promise an eventual solution, a way out, of sorts, a road leading back to the terra firma of truth. "Aleppo" closes with the letter-writer asking a mercy from his addressee; he implores V. to tell his story in order to clarify and *resolve* the problem of his wife's ontological status ("That in Aleppo Once..." 568). And V. seems to oblige, most succinctly, by simply appending a title to the poet's letter, the title of our story, which, alluding to *Othello*, suggests that the poet has murdered his wife at some

indeterminate point in their nightmarish emigration; he is currently repressing the knowledge of the crime and will shortly commit suicide, just like Shakespeare's king. In this way, the story's title promises to resolve, in a single stroke, the conundrum of the tale, pointing to a fixed truth that underlies the text's illusive surface.

- 29 The title of “Aleppo” might be less definitive, and more problematic, as a solution than it appears. If the poet has murdered his wife, the circumstances of the crime are never disclosed, and it remains impossible to separate the fact from the fictive in his tale: as the story's supporting cast continually offers evidence to suggest that the wife is still alive, if narrationally evasive, we have to question the poet's reliability in recounting the steps of his doomed search. In addition, insofar as the story's title is supplied by another fictional character, perhaps it's also ambiguous, a form of conjecture with regard to the truth. And the title might conceal a secondary ambiguity: perhaps the allusion to Shakespeare serves less to reify the facts of the crime than to confirm the poet's slide into the fictive, a condition of pernicious textuality from which he can't return. These problems notwithstanding, the title of “Aleppo”, as a mechanism, does suggest that in *Lolita* too, readers are invited to probe the limits of the narrative reality and search out what really happened. Connolly tells us that this is where the debate over the novel properly begins; near the end of his essay, he writes:

Readers of *Lolita* may find themselves disagreeing as to how many of the episodes and encounters in the novel are the product of Humbert's imagination, and what the implications of such imaginings may be. (Connolly 61)

- 30 In the next sections of this essay, I will lay out an alternate theory regarding the boundaries of the real in *Lolita*, addressing the role of John Ray in demarcating these boundaries for the reader, and speculating about the junctures at which reality withdraws (or manifests) in the novel.

Paging John Ray

One can (and should) engage a specially trained proofreader so that misprints and omissions do not disfigure the elusive truth. (*Strong Opinions* 182)

- 31 Like his predecessor in “Aleppo”, John Ray might also be guilty of tinkering in a leading way with the title of the manuscript in his possession. Although Humbert frequently uses the word *male* as a noun, there is little in the text to suggest that he would see himself primarily as either “white” or “widowed” and thus append the subtitle “*the Confession of a White Widowed Male*” to his manuscript.³ On the contrary, there is some evidence to suggest that Humbert would have concurred with Nabokov and called the work simply, resonantly, *Lolita* (the manuscript's first and last word; the obsessive repetition of “Lolita” in Part One, Chapter 26; and also some pointed phrasing, as we will see, in Nabokov's Afterword to the novel). However, beyond this additional similarity between the texts' meta-narrators, a significant difference emerges in their respective roles. Ray has the opportunity to say a good deal more about Humbert than V. does about his correspondent, and in the process, Ray reveals some puzzling affinities with the so-called confessor. Not surprisingly then, Ray has been at the center of the controversy over the novel's final sequences in Coalmont and Parkington. For years, critics have examined the suspicious traces of Humbert's vocal signature in Ray's Foreword, with Ferger being the latest, and this textual phenomenon has made it possible to argue that the two writers are in fact the same, that they share an identity, just as critics contend that John Shade and Charles Kinbote share an identity in *Pale*

Fire.⁴ Ferger goes so far as to list, in a footnote, all of the individual words (excepting articles, pronouns, etc.) held in common between the Foreword and the manuscript. Although he stops short of claiming that the two characters are one, he cites these correspondences as evidence, in the confession, of Ray's editorial presence (Ferger 154).

- 32 Anyone interested in witnessing in real life this blurring of the boundaries between narrator and commentator should revisit Brian Boyd's chapter on *Lolita* in *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Boyd adopts a surprising number of Humbertian intonations, word choices and syntactic constructions, much as we see Ray doing in the Foreword. To choose one example, here's how Boyd summarizes the scene at Hourglass Lake, when Humbert considers killing Charlotte Haze:

There seems to be only one solution; [sic] to kill Charlotte. [...] But Humbert cannot do it: as she swims trustfully and clumsily at his side, he realizes he will never be able to make himself put her to death. (Boyd 1991, 241)

- 33 Here is the corresponding passage in the novel:

Simple, was it not? But what d'ye know, folks—I just could not make myself do it! She swam beside me, a trustful and clumsy seal, and all the logic of passion screamed in my ear: Now is the time! And folks, I just couldn't! [...] I realized the melancholy fact that neither tomorrow, nor Friday, nor any other day or night, could I make myself put her to death. (87)

- 34 Between the scene and Boyd's summary, there are some striking stylistic similarities: the syntactic emphasis on Humbert's inability to “do it” is duplicated in Boyd's sketch of the scene, as is the phrase “make myself/himself put her to death”, and the distinctive adjectives in Humbert's prose are converted by Boyd into adverbs. Later in the same paragraph, Boyd describes the arrival on the scene of Jean Farlow, “an amateur painter, who came to the lake early *in quest of rare light effects*” (Boyd 1991, 241), and here, he borrows the highlighted phrase directly from Humbert's description of Jean (82). Given such correspondences, it's doubtful that anyone would claim that Nabokov has therefore invented Boyd, or conversely that Boyd has invented Nabokov and his novel. Unfortunately, the voices and identities of Ray and Humbert are not so easily disentangled.
- 35 A reflexive quality certainly emerges between Ray's Foreword and Humbert's tale; not only words and wordplay, but actions and motifs also unite the former and the latter. Perhaps most conspicuous is the theme of transference, which often involves a family relative, be it a close or distant relation. Ray's acquisition of the manuscript, through his cousin, echoes Humbert's absorption into the arctic expedition (headed by the cousin of his doctor), his arrival at the Haze home (brokered by McCoo), his acquisition (so to speak) of *Lolita* (transferred from Charlotte), as well as Quilty's acquisition of the girl (the list could go on). These correspondences are essential to integrate the Foreword into a larger aesthetic design that yokes both facets of the novel together; in some ways, the details of Ray's text seem to vindicate Humbert, justifying his paranoia, his sense that the machinations of a sinister fate are encoded in the margins and minutiae of his experience. And because the two texts are so linked, any reading of the novel must account for the role of the Foreword in corroborating or subverting Humbert's claims. As Boyd points out, this is the major shortcoming of Dolinin's argument (the same could be said of Anthony Moore's); when Dolinin claims that Humbert remains at large and no murder has occurred, he neglects the narrative epilogue that Ray supplies, which tells us that a crime has been committed, Humbert is

awaiting trial, and the major and minor characters have lives (and deaths) beyond the scope of Humbert's narration. Unlike Dolinin, Connolly accounts for the evidence in the Foreword, and does so by claiming that Humbert has invented Ray as well as the scenes in Coalmont and Parkington: thus, Ray is another mask for Humbert, the Foreword another deception perpetrated on the reader. Indeed, one of the Foreword's minor details captures the spirit of this proposition: the "Poling" of Ray's "*Poling Prize*" (3) might contain a reference to Poe (as in "Poe's underling"), in which case the distance between Ray and Edgar H. Humbert appears to collapse.

- 36 In his 2004 article, Ferger argues the corollary position, suggesting that Ray is the puppeteer pulling Humbert's strings. Ferger recognizes some of the limits of his argument. He acknowledges that his excavation of anagrams—in which he decodes, for example, "Aubrey McFate" as a fusion of "Ray", "Cue" and "fat me" (a reference to Nabokov's girth in the 1950s)—might be said to reflect the "paroxysms of a fevered brain having contracted Humbert's paranoia" (Ferger 158). However, a larger problem might lie in the fact that Ferger wants us to see Ray as, on the one hand, a "surgeon of genius" (Ferger 141) capable of indefatigable punning and stylistic virtuosity and, on the other hand, as Fate's "inept secretary" (Ferger 195), an agent who overlooks the botched dates in the manuscript and the Foreword. A further problem is that, by Ferger's logic, there's really no need to set an upper limit on Ray's editorial changes: rather than altering only the manner in which Humbert kills Quilty, and subjecting Humbert to humiliation, what would prevent Ray, if he is indeed a stylistic genius, from altering the plot of the story even more dramatically? Could he not simply concoct, in addition to the poignant end of Humbert's story, its rapturous beginning and the relationship with Annabel? (Would his shadowgraphic signature not surface there as well?) In the end, Ferger's analysis, though marvelously detailed, leaves us with a portrait of Ray as a heartless graffitist who cheerfully and meretriciously has his way with Humbert's manuscript. Even so, his essential position with regard to Ray's influence strikes me as plausible, as does Connolly's view of Humbert as the single-author of the book. But the novel points toward a third view of the relation between Foreword and manuscript confession, one that allows for Ray to have some editorial presence in the narrative, but that reflects his subordinate status as a stylist and creator. Surveying the options within the identical debate over *Pale Fire*, Pekka Tammi calls this dual-author hypothesis "The Straightforward Reading" (Tammi 203).
- 37 The Foreword, in both its substance and its style, convinces me, as it has many readers, that Ray is primarily a clown, a pompous bumbler. In the novel's Afterword, Nabokov himself corrects Ray's mistaken claim that *Lolita* has a "moral in tow" (314), or, in Ray's words, a profound "*ethical impact*" (5). In order to arrive at this conclusion, Ray must not have been reading attentively; even if he fails to note the discrepant dates in Humbert's confession, at minimum, he should have noticed, as Boyd does, that Humbert conveniently reserves the scene of his "moral apotheosis"⁵ above the "mining town" (307) for the very end of his confession. Humbert will still, apotheosis notwithstanding, pursue *Lolita* to Coalmont and kill Quilty at Pavor Manor. As Boyd states, "far too few readers stop to think what that says about the quality of [Humbert's] repentance" (Boyd 1995), or the authenticity of any presumed "apotheosis". On this point, John Ray is in the deceived majority.
- 38 The style of Ray's Foreword has proven to be a sticking point in the debate, making it especially hard to separate the therapist from the rapist, and thus to paint the former

as “figure of fun”, to use Humbert's term (28). For Green, Bullock and Ferger, the voices of the two are virtually indistinguishable. And if we equate the two voices in this way, then naturally, it becomes nearly impossible to say who contributes what at any given point. While Ray does have a taste for alliteration and at times adopts Humbert's idiom, I, for one, hear a distinct difference in the writers' voices. In fact, to my ear, Ray's pedantic phrasing, convoluted syntax and editorial concerns bear a stronger resemblance to the style and concerns of his forerunner and namesake, John Ray, the eminent English naturalist and occasional grammarian. In *A Complete Collection of English Proverbs* (1768, republished in 1818),⁶ Ray begins by addressing concerns about the offensive nature of his material, just as Jr. will do in *Lolita*'s Foreword:

But though I do condemn the mention of any thing obscene, yet I cannot think all use of slovenly and dirty words to be such a violation of modesty, as to exact the discarding all proverbs of which they are ingredients. The useful notions, which many ill-worded proverbs do import, may I think compensate for their homely terms. (Ray iv)

- 39 Later in the same book, in a section titled “An Account of Some Errors and Defects in our English Alphabet, Orthography and Manner of Spelling”, Ray argues for the changes that he would implement to regularize spelling and ease the process of teaching and learning the language. Surprisingly, two of the five letters that Ray believes to be “superfluous” in the alphabet are C and Q (Ray 288), the very initials of Humbert's villain, Clare Quilty. What's more, here Ray appears to supply Quilty's nickname: he writes, “Q [...] is, by general consent, granted and agreed to be nothing else but *cu*” (Ray 288).⁷ This section of the book also anticipates, in more specific ways, the novel's Foreword. Addressing the opposition to his suggested changes, the historical Ray writes:

I know what is pleaded in defence of our present orthography, viz. That in this manner of writing, the etymologies and derivations of words appear, which if we should write, according as we pronounce, would not so easily be discerned. To which I answer, that the learned would easily observe them notwithstanding; and as for the vulgar and illiterate, it is all one to them; they can take no notice of such things. (Ray 286)

- 40 In the novel's Foreword, John Ray, Jr., similarly accounts for the responses of the vulgar “*cynic*” and “*the learned*” to Humbert's manuscript (5).
- 41 While Ray's prose echoes that of his namesake, it seems very, if not vastly, different from Humbert's. The Foreword's penultimate paragraph seems to me to reveal most clearly the distance between the writers. Starting with the serial sentence that begins “*No doubt, he is horrible*” (5), the paragraph reveals Ray's predilection for choppy syntax and tone-deaf phrasing: if this is Humbert's voice, it is Humbert's derogatory impersonation of the psychotherapist. (Humbert does show the ability to lampoon something like Ray's style in this regard as he reports the contents of John Farlow's fateful letter (266)). Perhaps the most conspicuous stylistic blunder in the paragraph is the line “*He is ponderously capricious*” (5), which reads as an empty oxymoron, with less sense in it than starchy phrasing. It's also worth noting that Ray ends his blunt appraisal of Humbert's character with the criticism “*He is not a gentleman*” (5). James McDonald cites this line as evidence of Ray's competence and insight, pointing to his ability to anticipate the responses of different sets of readers (McDonald 353); however, in its grotesque urbanity, its gross inadequacy to the subject, I would argue that the line indicts the priggishness and folly of both Ray and that audience. As the

culminating item in a series of rebukes, the line is especially deflating and off-key, but after this point, the sentence does, admittedly, shift rapidly to a different key as Ray channels Humbert's idiom and sentiment (the “*tendresse*” he evokes for Lolita).

- 42 Yet even here, when Ray seems closest to Humbert, he appears to be missing a crucial point: when Humbert uses the word *tendresse* with regard to Lolita, he uses it bitterly. As Humbert confronts Lolita about her missed piano lessons, and contemplates the duplicitous nymphet—who resembles a young, possibly disease-carrying, French prostitute—he reflects, “*Tendresse?* Surely that was an exploded myth” (204). The “myth” alludes to the transient feelings of tenderness that Humbert claims to have experienced with Lolita, a tenderness that had never been anything but criminal; the “limbless monsters of pain” (284), the memories that inspire a more authentic compassion for Lolita, are still awaiting their release in Coalmont. In praising the “*tendresse, the compassion for Lolita*” (5) that Humbert evokes, Ray appears to conflate awkwardly these incompatible emotional experiences. And given his blindness to the context in which Humbert uses the French term, Ray seems, at best, guilty of idealizing and sentimentalizing (procrusteanizing, as it were) the more complex character portraits that emerge in “umber and black Humberland” (166). In another passage in the Foreword, Ray reveals not just a lack of emotional sophistication, but a troubling callousness with regard to his subject. Ray writes:

[A]t least 12% of American adult males—a conservative estimate according to Dr. Blanche Schwarzmänn (verbal communication)—enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience 'H.H.' describes with such despair. (5)

- 43 The phrase “in one way or another” is an especially heartless evasion, a cruel euphemism for rape, yet the callousness seems largely comical, even harmless, couched as it is in a sentence that reveals Ray's penchant for scientific phrasing and his predilection for factoids (based apparently on hearsay). At worst, Ray is a buffoon, with sinister shadings to his buffoonery. To put this simply, as many of the novel's critics have concluded, Ray is the Polonius to Humbert's Hamlet.
- 44 The argument that Humbert has invented Ray, that he simulates the voice of the psychologist, thus explaining the occasional similarities in their phrase-making, is difficult to counter. However, the single-author theory begins to break down if we can isolate a role for Ray, distinct from Humbert's, in the manuscript confession itself, as Ferger attempts to do. And there is evidence in the text to suggest that Ray does take advantage of his editorial role to tamper with Humbert's manuscript. His emendations, identified by their vocal signature and contextual cues, appear in a second list, at the end of this paper. Rather than encoding his presence subliminally through puns and anagrams as Ferger suggests, the Ray that I'm proposing grafts entire passages onto the text: these interjections are characteristically disruptive, upsetting the tenor and rhythm of Humbert's frequently high-flown poetic style. The first act of editorial interference is illustrative.
- 45 On pages 19-20, as Humbert catalogues the historical and geographical prevalence of pedophilia, he claims, disingenuously, to be “winking happy thoughts into a little tiddle cup”. As the catalogue of examples winds down, we read:

So life went. Humbert was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilit he longed for. The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair. My little cup brims with tiddles. (20, emphasis mine)

- 46 I have italicized what I believe to be Ray's contribution to the paragraph. Note how the bland scientific style, characterized by abstract nouns, stands out distinctly from Humbert's more richly alliterative and emotionally extravagant prose. The digression seems comically disruptive at this point in the paragraph; in fact, the interjected sentences appear downright illogical in this context, the awkward contribution of an overzealous hack (who is a little creepy, besides). It's possible to argue that Ray might also have contributed the last line, the return to the motif of the tiddle cup, to mask his intrusion. However, I think not. As I read the sentence, it seems more likely that Humbert, through his allusions, has stumbled onto another historical (in this case, biblical) instance of deviant desire, and thus reminded himself, after an autobiographical interlude, of the motif. What's more, the final sentence—with its rhyming of “little” and “tiddles”, the assonant soft *i*'s in the verb and preposition, and even the subtle repetition of *m*—has a more luxuriant musicality, a poetic economy, than anything that occurs in the Foreword.
- 47 By my count, there are only eight of these intrusions in the text. As the previous paragraph suggests, this list might be subject to modification,⁸ but it does capture the essence of Ray's role in Humbert's manuscript and helps to delineate what I believe to be the crucial difference between the two writers. If my conjecture is right, then Ray's alertness and investment as a reader starts to wane after Humbert's decision to skip over the racier details of his “cohabitation” with *Lolita*. And it's this inattentiveness that allows Ray to misread or misunderstand Humbert's tale and its putative “moral apotheosis”. If this reading is plausible, then Nabokov has left us with exactly the kind of reader that he describes in his Afterword: such readers “expected a rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down” (313). Nabokov reiterates the point later in the Afterword, following the list of the novel's “subliminal coordinates” that give him a special creator's delight: he writes
- I realize very clearly that these and other scenes will be skimmed over or not noticed, or never even reached, by those who begin reading the book under the impression that it is something on the lines of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* or *Les Amours de Milord Grosvit*. (316)
- 48 The suggested titles referenced here sound suspiciously similar to the subtitle that Ray claims to have found on the manuscript. In his notes to *The Annotated Lolita*, Appel makes this connection explicit: “the entire subtitle parodies the titillating confessional novel [...] and the expectations of the reader who hopes *Lolita* will provide the pleasures of pornography” (319). If Ray has in fact grafted that subtitle onto Humbert's confession, then he paints himself not only as a poor reader, but as a therapist with a partly prurient interest in his subject matter. Fittingly then, in the list below, Ray's interjections cease by Chapter 27 of Part One, with Humbert and *Lolita* en route to *The Enchanted Hunters*, where Humbert will abjure the role of literary pornographer and frustrate the expectations of such readers: as he puts it, “I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. [...] A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134).
- 49 Two problems emerge immediately with regard to this vision of Ray. First, we have to acknowledge that Humbert himself models the same kind of readerly inattentiveness that we see in his copy-editor. Humbert claims not to have read in its entirety the script of *The Enchanted Hunters*, the play in which *Lolita* is cast in Beardsley—yet he does presume to summarize the complete plot, including the play's concluding revelation

that the heroine is a “down-to-brown-earth lass” independent of the Poet-character's imagination (200). So once again, the identities of Ray and Humbert appear to be on the verge of collapsing and merging—though I would argue that the coincidence doesn't necessarily obviate the differences between the characters: as other critics have observed of Nabokov's fiction, semblance is not necessarily sameness.

- 50 The second problem is that the evidence in the Foreword shows that Ray *has* read the manuscript in its entirety, at least closely enough to note *Lolita's* alias (Mrs. Richard Schiller) and to learn about Humbert's relationship with Rita, whom he takes up with after *Lolita* disappears. Lisa Sternlieb cites Ray's knowledge of Rita and Mona Dahl as evidence that points to a single-author interpretation: “why would Mr. Windmuller of Ramsdale [Ray's informant] know anything about Rita?” she asks, leading to the conclusion that Ray is Humbert's invention (Sternlieb 161). However, the evidence in the novel is ambiguous on this point, suggesting that Ray might be trustworthy after all. Of his visit to Windmuller, Humbert says that the lawyer “thought I was in California” (290). This suspicion echoes John Farlow's similar supposition that Humbert “was living with a notorious divorcee in California” (266). Given Farlow's and Windmuller's shared interest in Humbert's affairs, it's not inconceivable that Windmuller would likewise know about Rita, or that Humbert would impart this information to his lawyer in the margins of their conversation. Ray's knowledge of Mona Dahl (of Beardsley) is perhaps harder to reconcile because Mona has no apparent ties to the Ramsdale community. However, Humbert claims, albeit evasively, to have found the letter from Mona (sent to *Lolita* at Wace) “preserved in one of the Tour Books” (223), so perhaps here too, there is a slender evidentiary chain that validates Ray's knowledge. Then again, Ray might be confusing the information that he gets from Windmuller with the information he gleans from Humbert (and further revealing his preferences with regard to the novel's cast). Even if a shadow of doubt hovers over these details in the Foreword, with regard to Ray's performance as a reader and editor, the evidence suggests that his interest in emendation flags, but he does soldier on to the end, mitigating somewhat the extent of his incompetence.
- 51 Mitigating evidence is a key phrase if we are to assess, fairly and accurately, Ray's character, and especially the charge that he shares some of Humbert's pathology. There's no disputing the consensus opinion that Ray at times channels the voice of his creator, Nabokov himself. Ferger notes that “The mention of Judge Woolsey's 1933 decision regarding *Ulysses*, the functional necessity of 'sensuous scenes,' and the 'shocking surprise' of all great original art is complementary to Nabokov's concerns” in the Afterword (Ferger 152). The middle example, regarding those “‘*aphrodisiac*’” scenes (5), is especially worrisome because, given Ray's taste for the lurid, his claim about the necessity and functionality of such scenes invites suspicion. Yet Nabokov is unequivocal on the subject in the Afterword; he claims not to bother himself over the distinction between the “sensuous and the sensual” in the realm of art (314), apparently validating Ray's position. Here, I'm content to conclude that Ray voices ineptly, and to misguided ends, an opinion that his creator articulates much more sensibly and uncontroversially. For me, the most troubling aspect of the Foreword—what makes it harder to sustain this view of Ray as hoodwinked editor and closeted pervert—is a matter of quotation marks.
- 52 Before proceeding to divulge the fates of the novel's major and minor characters, Ray states that he does so “*For the benefit of old-fashioned readers, who wish to follow the*

destinies of the 'real' people beyond the 'true' story"(4). Those quotation marks around "real" and "true" belong equally to Nabokov, who highlights their use in this context in the Afterword: he notes his effort to "inject a modicum of average 'reality' (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy" (312). What's troubling here is that the quotation marks in the Foreword equip Ray with the knowledge that the novel's characters (and possibly its audience) are in Nabokov's sense fictitious, and thus Humbert's tale has no essential basis in reality. This imputation would put Ray in the know with regard to the illusory nature of the book's action, including its last chapters and, as some critics would have it, the matter of Quilty's identity. But rather than conclude that Ray is, therefore, an avatar of Humbert (the single-author theory), it's equally possible that Nabokov is content to leave us, here too, with a conundrum, an aporia, an insoluble dilemma. By investing Ray with authentic insight, he prevents the Foreword from devolving to satire, a greatly diminished and flattened form of parody.⁹ Ray might deserve Nabokov's ridicule, but he also receives some of Nabokov's charity. And he's not alone. Humbert attributes a similar capacity for anomalous insight to Charlotte: "She was like a musician who may be an odious vulgarian in ordinary life, devoid of tact and taste; but who will hear a false note in music with diabolical accuracy of judgment" (84). Pekka Tammi suggests that this jarring vacillation between voices, the authentic and the imbecilic, is "an inherent property of all Nabokovian narration" (Tammi 300). Perhaps this is the maneuver by which Nabokov subverted the didacticism that he professed to despise.

- 53 There might be another way to resolve the dilemma posed by Ray's knowledge of the novel's illusive real. However, this resolution hinges on an alternate account of Humbert's crime, an account that would allow even Ray, poor reader that he is, to see that much of Humbert's tale is pure invention, not rooted in objective reality.

Recovering the real

But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere, will quietly set out—[...] and presently he will ring at my door—a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus. (*Pale Fire* 301)

- 54 Finding a discrete, perceptible role for Ray in Humbert's manuscript, isolating the differences between the characters, is crucial, as I've said, if we are to rule out the single-author hypothesis in the debate surrounding the novel. Humbert can't be inventing Ray if Ray leaves a detectable trace in Humbert's manuscript (unless we claim that Humbert is simulating these intrusions as part of the deception, which seems increasingly unlikely, given the consistency in the emergent portrait of Ray). And once we establish a role and an identity for Ray independent of Humbert, then we can, with some reservations, accept the veracity of the corroborating details that Ray supplies regarding Humbert's narrative. Readers will likely have to reason for themselves what or what not to trust in the Foreword. The facts that Humbert has committed a crime and dies in jail while awaiting trial, and that Mrs. Richard Schiller dies in Gray Star both seem to me to be reliable: partly because the information lies beyond the scope of Humbert's narration and, thus, appears to be free of Humbert's characteristic distortions, and partly because, as Toker says, the tangled dates that result from this information appear to be a "deliberate device"(Toker 210). Further, the Ray that emerges in the novel—an unreliable editor who accepts naively Humbert's purported

redemption and ineptly doctors his manuscript—seems to lack the resources, the talent and imagination, to invent such fates for the characters. The question we face, then, is: how is it possible for Humbert to invent some or all of the novel's last nine chapters and yet find himself arrested as Ray tells us?

- 55 The Foreword is evasive on the point of the crime that Humbert has committed. Christina Tekiner suggests that Humbert has likely been arrested for the rape and abduction of *Lolita* (Tekiner 468). Toker explores, but discards, the possibility that Humbert has murdered *Lolita* (Toker 213-16). Perhaps the strongest evidence in the Foreword that indicates the crime to be murder is the reference to the publication of Vivian Darkbloom's *My Cue*, which suggests that Quilty is in fact dead, thus prompting a posthumous biography. The very next line in the Foreword seems to confirm the point, as Ray here mentions the “*various cemeteries involved*” in the novel's action, whose “*caretakers [...] report that no ghosts walk*” (4). This joke, in poor taste, suggests that Ray is blind to the spectral lives of the novel's characters, the afterlife they find in art. More importantly, in order for those cemeteries to be “*various*”, there would have to be multiple deaths, and because this paragraph in the Foreword mentions only Mrs. Schiller's death, we have to infer the oblique reference to Quilty's death, as well as Humbert's and perhaps Charlotte's. Even so, the mention of the biography is itself problematic in that Quilty's name would have to be one of the few “*authentic*” names in the book, a name not disguised, or only partly disguised, by a pseudonym. (Otherwise, Darkbloom's title wouldn't make sense, or would suggest an invention on Ray/Humbert's part.) Presumably, the entry for Quilty in *Who's Who in the Limelight* confirms that the name has not been coined by Humbert (only if we allow that he's not inventing and/or editing this facet of the book)—this despite the fact that he does play extravagantly with the name as if it were a figure of his fancy.¹⁰ Once we surmount this obstacle, the mention of Darkbloom's biography, coupled with Humbert's own declamations (“*You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style*”(9), “*Guilty of killing Quilty!*” (31)), gives us good reason to believe that Humbert is the murderer that he claims to be.
- 56 Is it possible, then, for Humbert to commit a murder, get arrested and start writing on Sept. 22nd? If so, we would have a way to reconcile the novel's apparently discrepant dates and, as Toker says, “*restore verisimilitude*” to the narration (Toker 218). To answer the question, we have to consider the novel's geography, much like Beale sketching a diagram of the car accident that kills Charlotte Haze in Chapter 23 of Part One. Dieter Zimmer has compiled a wonderfully detailed map of Humbert's America, and while he does admit that the invented New England towns of Ramsdale, Parkington, Beardsley, etc. are difficult to place unexceptionably, he argues convincingly that Briceland is in Connecticut, which leads him to deduce that Ramsdale is in Massachusetts and Parkington in eastern New York (Zimmer). While we can't be certain about the geography, we do know that all of the pertinent sites for the murder are located in New England. We also know (to the extent that we know anything) that Humbert is in Manhattan (his apartment with Rita overlooks Central Park) when he receives the fateful letters from Farlow and *Lolita* in the morning mail. And we know that he must have visited Jack Windmuller (as confirmed in Ray's Foreword) and possibly Ivor Quilty (whose name would also have to be authentic, or minimally disguised) in Ramsdale, before traveling to Pavor Manor, which is just outside Parkington (a mere 40 miles from Ramsdale, according to Zimmer's calculations). The

point is that it would be logistically possible for Humbert to receive the letter on the morning of the 22nd, commit a murder *in lower New England*, get arrested and start writing, all before midnight on that day. A very busy day, but possible. Further, if Zimmer is correct in concluding that Parkington is in eastern New York, we have the beginnings of an explanation for a puzzling feature, as noted by Dolinin, in the Russian *Lolita*. For that translation, Nabokov changed Humbert's poignant claim, addressed to Lolita, "I can still talk to you from here to Alaska" (309). The Russian version specifies the place where Humbert is writing from, "I am in New York, and you are in Alaska", leading Dolinin to believe that no murder has occurred at all (Dolinin 39). If Pavor Manor is in New York state, Humbert would likely be detained (jailed and tried) there, which would leave him both "in New York" and in jail. The text of Nabokov's screenplay for the film adaptation of the novel poses an additional problem here in that Humbert is said to be housed specifically in "*The Tombs*" (*Lolita: A Screenplay* 3)—echoing Humbert's complaint of his "tombal seclusion" (308)—which is located in Manhattan. It seems unlikely that Humbert would be held and tried in Manhattan if the crime didn't occur in the city's jurisdiction. However, the screenplay frequently deviates from the novel, as Zimmer notes, on points of geography (fusing Wace and Elphinstone into a single place, for example) (Zimmer). For similar reasons, Toker emphatically rejects the idea of using the screenplay to adjudicate debates over the novel (Toker 210).

- 57 While it's possible for Humbert to complete all of the above errands on the 22nd, a visit to Coalmont—800 miles from New York—is out of the question within this time frame. The distance to Coalmont might itself be part of the ruse, Humbert's attempt to camouflage his last encounter with the girl he claims to love (and if the scene is invented, the distance is irrelevant), but even so, as Toker explained in 1989, the circumstances under which Humbert learns of Lolita's location—her letter dated Sept. 18th—suggest that Humbert has lost contact with reality: the shape-shifting penmanship of the letter from Rita's mother compels readers to view with suspicion the subsequent manifestation of Lolita's voice (Toker 219). In this respect, the problem of the novel's correspondence appears identical to the problems of the English alphabet, as noted by the historical John Ray: "it wants some letters that are necessary, and contains some that are superfluous" (Ray 286). With regard to the real in the novel, Lolita's letter belongs to the latter category. What's at issue here is exactly what Bruss called attention to in 1976: Humbert characteristically "misses even as he transmits the truth of his condition" (Bruss 141), and readers have to decide how to separate that truth from the evasions and distortions at virtually every stage of the narrative. When we consider the mounting evidence of Humbert's fabrications (the fate of Valeria and Maximovich, the dubious arctic expedition, Humbert's concoction of a parental relationship with Lolita, and of course much more), it's likely that Humbert never learns of Coalmont, and thus never makes it to Coalmont, however convincingly he portrays the growth and change in both Lolita and his feelings for her.
- 58 In addition to the problem of the letter, a palpable air of illusion inheres in the Coalmont scene itself. Dolinin explains how "Humbert concocts the image of the grown-up Lolita from fragments of memories" (Dolinin 37), supplying a future for her in Coalmont that, "while plausibly banal, does fulfill her wishes" (Dolinin 36). That future also evokes the clichéd narratives that dominate, according to Humbert, Lolita's childish imagination. He writes:

I believe the poor fierce-eyed child had figured out that with a mere fifty dollars in her purse she might somehow reach Broadway or Hollywood—or the foul kitchen of a diner (Help Wanted) in a dismal ex-prairie state. (185)

- 59 According to the Coalmont sequence, the last is more or less where she ends up—“for almost two years, she had [...] just drifted, oh, doing some restaurant work in small places” (277)—and of course, she has a brush with stardom, or a parody of the same, in Quilty's company at Duk Duk ranch. However, the air of fabrication is just as thick, perhaps thicker, at Pavor Manor, yet the Foreword confirms for us that Humbert must, in some fashion, have killed Quilty. So why should Coalmont be the purely invented scene, while Pavor Manor is merely a distortion of a real event? For starters, such a reading serves to unify several of the novel's threads, its major motifs and minor details, as we'll see. However, what persuades me, in part, of the irreality in Coalmont is precisely its heightened *naturalism* when compared to Pavor Manor. The decrepit dog; the details of the Schillers' sleeping arrangements; the faulty wiring; the pathetic hors d'oeuvres, “marshmallows and potato chips” (273); Humbert's impulse “to squeeze out the blackheads” on Dick's nose (274); to say nothing of the starkly honest tenor of Humbert's self-assessment and contrition: all of this makes for a powerfully convincing, and deeply moving, illusion. There is a grand irony in the fact that the more plausible of the two disputed scenes might be the purer fabrication. The possibility of this irony has, itself, a persuasive force.
- 60 Persuasive, yes, but not quite conclusive. It's possible to argue that Humbert does reach *Lolita* in Coalmont, and the scene might have transpired only slightly differently from the way he records it. However, here, I want to pursue the alternate possibility—that the scene takes place only in Humbert's imagination. This reading leaves us with two more questions. First, if Humbert invents the reunion scene, how does he know that the Schillers are headed to Alaska, or to Gray Star in the “*remotest Northwest*” (4) as Ray confirms in the Foreword? And secondly, if Humbert never sees *Lolita* again, how does he learn the identity of the man he intends to murder?
- 61 The answers to both of these questions are perhaps as frustrating as they are relieving. Regarding the first, if we grant that a trip to Coalmont is unlikely, the only plausible explanation for Humbert's knowledge of the Schillers' plans is that it's a coincidence, a motif—admittedly vexed—that courses throughout the book. One compelling instance of this motif, and perhaps most pertinent for our purpose here, is a minor episode in the novel. When Charlotte Haze is killed by Beale's car, *Lolita* is away at Camp Q., and to prevent interfering Samaritans, like the Farlows, from contacting Lo at camp, Humbert claims that she had gone with “the Intermediate Group on a five-day hike and could not be reached” (100). Days later (an unspecified number of days), when Humbert attempts to reach *Lolita* himself by phone, he learns that she had gone “on a hike in the hills with her group and was expected to return” later that day (106). Humbert places this call from a payphone, which promptly returns the coins he had inserted, and of the coincidence and the rebate Humbert reflects, “One wonders if this sudden discharge, this spasmodic refund, was not correlated somehow [...] with my having invented that little expedition before ever learning of it as I did now” (107).
- 62 It hardly needs saying that coincidences abound and function even more prominently in the novel: Humbert plans to murder Charlotte, and then fate conveniently lends a hand; Humbert and Quilty both stay at The Enchanted Hunters on the same night (to say nothing of Briceland room numbers and Ramsdale house numbers); the play that

shares the name of the hotel (as Boyd and Ferger discuss) corresponds surprisingly with the course of the novel's events and the revelation of Lo as a “down-to-brown-earth lass” (200); Humbert invents the shooting of a polar bear to augment his record as an explorer (45), which, as Connolly notes, suspiciously anticipates his description of the murder of Quilty (the list goes on). However, the simulated hiking trip perhaps best captures the coincidence that we see operating in the Coalmont sequence. Humbert invents a destiny for Lolita (her pregnancy, her husband, their plans), which he discloses in Windmuller's office, and which turns out, pending Windmuller's presumed investigations, to be true. As Toker puts it, “[Lolita] may, indeed, have effected her return to normal life in exactly the way Humbert imagines her to have done” (Toker 222). Throughout the novel, the invented has a way of becoming the actual. However, we must note that, through the same relation, the actual has a way of becoming illusory or invented. In the case of the hiking trip and Humbert's use of the phone, it's possible that the “spasmodic refund” suggests that the call never went through—payphones return coins in such cases. The evidence that confirms, for Humbert, the magic of the coincidence might equally suggest that he and the reader are gripped by delusion.

- 63 Unfortunately, similar problems plague the answer to the second question posed above: how does Humbert learn of Quilty's identity?
- 64 In the famous passage from the Coalmont episode, when Lo reveals Quilty's identity, Humbert withholds that name from his readers, interjecting instead the memory of Hourglass Lake and Charlotte's enunciation of the word “waterproof” (272). This narrative sleight-of-hand suggests that the discovery of Quilty's identity might be connected to the scene at the lake, as if Humbert is revealing indirectly what he is unable to articulate consciously: if Coalmont is an invention, the truth might lie at Hourglass Lake. But because Humbert controls the narration at the lake, too, it's impossible to validate the content of that scene and its (averted) disclosures. I would argue that the interjection cues readers to detect Humbert's narrational method, to see that the scene in Coalmont, like so many others, is a palimpsest of time and dramatic material. And indeed, the two scenes overlap in some important ways. Lo's facial expression as she speaks Quilty's name (she “pucker[s] her parched lips” (271)) is similar to the “fish mouth” (89) that Charlotte makes on the beach, just after she speaks the word “waterproof”. Both scenes feature peripheral characters who labor in the background and are associated with impaired hearing (the retired policeman and plumber; Dick Schiller and one-armed Bill). And in both scenes, Quilty's identity is on the verge of being disclosed, only to be withheld. At the beach, John Farlow arrives just in time to prevent his wife, Jean, from sharing a bawdy story about Quilty (89); in Coalmont, it's Humbert who intercedes. Of course, many scenes contribute to the fabrication of Coalmont; Humbert's interjection of “waterproof”, the word overlaying Quilty's identity, alerts us to this compositional strategy, and perhaps only to this strategy. Instead of supplying absolute knowledge of the truth, Humbert offers correspondence, coincidence and resemblance: a lateral slide back into the text, a referential feedback loop that circulates teasingly, but fails to explain how Humbert learns of his rival's identity. The means of disclosure in Coalmont serve to conceal exactly what the chapter promises to reveal.
- 65 If the Lake scene tells us little, the text does point to a less rational explanation for Humbert's acquisition of his target. To see how, we have to consider more closely John Farlow's letter, which arrives on the day of the murder, Sept. 22nd. Connolly suggests

that this letter precipitates the invention of the entire reunion scene (Connolly 48). He explains that the changes in Farlow's character—from “dull, sedate and reliable” (265) to something more adventurous and self-assertive (married to a South American ski bunny, absolving himself of Humbert's affairs)—might lead Humbert to imagine a similarly transformed Lolita, aged, impoverished and pregnant in Coalmont, a nymphet no more. In this reading, Farlow's name, or pseudonym, itself becomes suggestive of the fate that has befallen Dolly, or that Humbert imagines for her: *far Lo*. Importantly, since Farlow's letter contains information that Ray confirms (namely, the assignment of Humbert's new Ramsdale lawyer, Windmuller), we have reason to believe that the letter from Farlow is not itself a fabrication—at least not wholly. Those changes in Farlow do bear traces of Humbert's obsessive fantasies, as Dolinin notes: the new wife's age, exotic ethnicity and athletic prowess all evoke Humbert's vision of Lolita (Dolinin 35). Further, Humbert seems to take great pains to make the letter plausible, as if to cover a threadbare deception. According to Humbert, the letter includes a verificational photograph of the newlyweds and also contains a mention of the wife's father, who is a count. On both points, the letter is suspicious. In Briceland, Humbert seeks out a newspaper photograph to corroborate his memories of his stay at The Enchanted Hunters, but the photo is inconclusive (262-63), and as I note earlier, the designation of royalty has an aura of suspicion surrounding it in Humbert's inconsistent account of his first wife's fate.

- 66 Even with these qualifications, I think Connolly is right to suppose that Farlow's letter has a Proustian effect on Humbert's imagination. But rather than inspiring the creation of the Coalmont sequence, the letter might trigger, more crucially and perhaps irrationally, Humbert's recognition of his rival's identity. The evidence is inescapably ambiguous here: Farlow's suggestion, so important to Connolly, that Humbert “produce Dolly quick” (266) might be read as a covert reference to Quilty and his role overseeing the production of *The Enchanted Hunters* in Beardsley, thus prompting Humbert to identify belatedly his nemesis. However, since Humbert is reporting from memory the contents of Farlow's letter, this evidentiary proof seems hopelessly compromised. The line does contain an idiomatic solecism, out of character for Humbert, using the adjective *quick* instead of the adverb *quickly*, which gives an air of authenticity to the sentence. But this might be more of Humbert's ventriloquism. It is possible, even likely, that what catalyzes the discovery for Humbert will remain mysterious. I can only speculate that the arrival of Farlow's letter jars Humbert's memory and dislodges the subliminal connections that link Quilty to Lolita. On some level, Humbert's narrative deceptions faithfully recreate this shift from blindness to insight for the reader. That is, Humbert does experience the sensation of “melting in... golden peace” as “the fusion took place” (272), but rather than taking place in Coalmont, the epiphany likely transpires beside his mailbox in Manhattan. It would have to, if Humbert is to commit a murder before midnight on the 22nd as Ray tells us. This isn't the most satisfying conclusion, and certainly not beyond dispute. However, the novel does lend some rational support for this aggravatingly intuitive solution; it contains two other instances in which Humbert retrieves identities, recalling elusive names by mysterious means: those of Maximovich and Edusa Gold at first evade him, and then return to him through processes that are more serendipitous than rational (30, 208). It's possible that Quilty's identity is the third and crowning instance of the series, and that Farlow's letter, mysteriously, tantalizingly, precipitates the discovery.

- 67 One immediate, and potentially explosive, consequence of this reading is that, by this logic, there is really nothing to prove definitively that Quilty is the culprit that Humbert claims. It remains possible that Quilty is no guiltier than the Beardsley art instructor Albert Riggs (253), or anyone else, of the crime for which Humbert kills him. In the end, Quilty may well have been an innocent—the merely real object on which Humbert projects his flights of fantasy, just as he does with *Lolita*. Thus, John Ray's remark that, without the manuscript confession, the “*cause and purpose*” of Humbert's crime “*would have continued to remain a complete mystery*” (4) acquires new resonance. Essentially, the reading that I'm proposing makes Humbert, like his predecessor Hermann in *Despair*, another Gradus (that is, if we accept that *Pale Fire*'s Gradus has mistaken his victim John Shade for Judge Goldsworth), as all three murders hinge on a case of mistaken identity. Seen in this light, Humbert's description of the events culminating in the murder would be obviously false, thus prompting Ray to note the distance between Humbert's “*true' story*” and reality.
- 68 For better or worse, it's likely that an accurate account of Quilty's murder never comes to light, nor do the means by which Humbert learns the identity of his victim. It's also likely that we remain in the dark with regard to the exact circumstances under which *Lolita* escapes from her captor. And ultimately, as Boyd suggests, it doesn't seem possible to argue irrefutably whether we should trust and treat as reliable the contradictory dates between the manuscript and the Foreword. If this seems an improbable solution to the mystery of the novel, consider that the same irresolvable ambiguity inheres in “*That in Aleppo Once...*”. In that story too, if a murder has in fact taken place, we never learn the exact circumstances of its time, place or immediate motivation. The story teases us with a possible disclosure of the crime: as the narrator glosses the process of eliciting from his wife the exact details of her infidelity, he writes, “*I failed to link up [the scene's] sharp-angled grotesque shadows with the dim limbs of my wife as she shook and rattled and dissolved in my violent grasp*” (“*That in Aleppo Once...*” 565). But nothing more definitively incriminating emerges. Both the story and the novel present us with a radiant and profoundly moving narrative, a scintillating illusive surface, but insofar as the “*real*” is concerned, they give us only limited access, leave us with errata and aporia, error and uncertainty.
- 69 In “*Even Homais Nods*”, Boyd characterizes this narrative duplicity, or multiplicity, as “*bog and fog*” (Boyd 1995), but these seem to be the prevailing climatic conditions of Nabokov's fiction. Tammi puts the matter this way:
- It is a frequent practice in the author's fiction [...] to *subsume* [the narrated world] *in its entirety into the subjective consciousness of* [a character] [...] [T]he reader is left querying whether *any* straightforward report may not be revealed as a product of a purely private vision. (Tammi 76)
- 70 This is the predicament of *Lolita*'s readers. Boyd doubts that what we gain by such a reading—in which the novel hemorrhages its own reality—is equal to what is lost: namely, much of the pathos and moral force of the book. However, illusionist readers of the novel would counter this concern by obviating the difference between the actual and the virtual, the real and the imagined, arguing that this is precisely the point. Whether Humbert visits Coalmont or not, the experience has exactly the same force for him and for the reader. In this way, the novel dramatizes and thematizes both the problem and the power of literature.¹¹

71 This radical aesthetic engineering, the novel's narrative duplicity, also supplies a tactical corrective to the literary theorizing that Humbert himself offers in the novel's Part Two. When Humbert, inspired by Farlow's letter, waxes philosophical on the nature of literary characters, he emphasizes their "stability of type", their ontological fixity, in order to describe a peculiarly limited view of human behavior and potential:

Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds, and, similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. (265)

72 In this sentiment, Humbert appears to be equating fate and character, again mistaking the self-service of his imagination for a grasp of the real, and this myopic vision fails him at least twice in the novel (like Farlow, Valeria also acts decidedly out of character (27-30)). Even so, Humbert's assessment might be true of the literary examples he discusses, King Lear and Emma Bovary; their personas might change dramatically between readings, but their fates remain immutable. For Nabokov's fiction, however, it appears that this axiom no longer applies. For Nabokov's characters, fate isn't necessarily fixed or inalterable; even the inevitability of death becomes, for them, eerily negotiable. In the debate over *Lolita*'s chronology, we have a handful of Humberts (Ray's, Boyd's, Connolly's, Dolinin's, Ferger's), serial Rays (Boyd's, Ferger's, McDonald's, Green's, mine), competing Charlottes (who may have been nicer to her daughter than Humbert lets on), and many, if not a whole "litter of" (300), Lolitas (one nobly persevering; another pragmatically conspiring with Quilty; another, a murder victim; another, a pure cipher with no material existence outside of Humbert's fantasies)—all of whom are embroiled, then, in multiple plots. Instead of the frozen afterlife that Humbert envisions for Lear and Emma, Nabokov's characters enjoy a considerably more animated immortality. In this regard, it seems ironic that Humbert does much of the invention in *Lolita*, forging that comparatively liberated afterlife for his victim. We might never know how conscious Humbert is of what he has finally wrought, or if he even knows that he has invented the novel's last chapters. But Nabokov, I would argue, has no such doubts. Absent Ray, the text's errata and the ensuing debate over the novel's chronology, it's likely the immortality that Humbert fashions for Lolita would be considerably depleted, more tombal fact than prismatic fiction, more prison perhaps than paradise.

LIST 1: *LOLITA*'S ERRATA

- 73 Page 3: The novel's first sentence, in Ray's Foreword, contains a problem in pronoun reference. In the clause "*it preambulates*", there is a potential for confusion, as discussed above.
- 74 Page 3: The title of Ray's "*Do the Senses make Sense?*" contains a capitalization error: the title should read "*Do the Senses Make Sense?*".
- 75 Page 27: The phrase "she had something inside" should likely read "she had [left] something inside". However, the omission results in a line consistent with Humbert's view of Valeria as "brainless" (26) and essentially devoid of will.
- 76 Page 50: The phrase "alas for my fair driver;" might be more clearly punctuated with a comma after "driver", instead of the semicolon. The phrase seems more closely related

to the clause that follows, “Lo was already pulling at the door”, than to the clause that precedes it, “Ignore her’, yelled Haze (killing the motor)”.

- 77 Page 53: “[Walter] Duncan, the foul-smelling clown”, is the only student referred to by his last name in Humbert's rendering of the life behind the class list. While technically not a solecism, the anomaly suggests that Humbert's invention of the classroom scene is imperfect, that his imagination is prone to distortion and confusion.
- 78 Page 74: Humbert characterizes himself as a widower (“[...] the groom is a widower”) and technically he is. Valeria “died in childbirth around 1945” (30), according to Humbert's informant, a doctor from Pasadena; Humbert and Charlotte marry in the summer of 1947, which would clearly make him a widower. However, later, during his first road trip with *Lolita*, Humbert describes his encounter with the “White Russian, a baron [...] who had known in California good old Maximovich and Valeria” (155). This is presumably the moment at which Humbert learns of Valeria's fate, so when he describes his wedding plans with Charlotte, he seems to be confusing layers of time, availing himself of information that he wasn't yet privy to. Also note, of course, that Humbert's “doctor” has changed into a “baron”, an even more prestigious and authoritative informant. As with the previous error, this one isn't a solecism.
- 79 Page 74*: “Worth while” is typed as a two-word phrase when it should be a single word.
- 80 Page 97: The phrase “accumulation in the page” should probably read “accumulation [on] the page”.
- 81 Page 108*: The phrase “with a pancake makeup” should read “with pancake makeup”.
- 82 Page 113: A dash is used erroneously, or incompletely, in the sentence that reads in part “and since [...] the limits and rules of such girlish games are fluid, or at least too childishly subtle for the senior partner to grasp—I was [...]”. I suspect this error coincides with one of Ray's intrusions—the last that I can see—in Humbert's text.
- 83 Page 115: The phrase “kissed her in the neck ”should, technically, read “kissed her [on] the neck”. Nabokov is likely having fun with Humbert's imported English here: “in the neck” conveys the violence and clumsiness of the act.
- 84 Page 120: The loaded sentence “Show, wight ray”—which Ferger insightfully highlights as a point of contact between Humbert and John Ray (“wight” here referring to a “creature” (171))—contains an unnecessary comma. The comma suggests that “wight ray” is being addressed here, rather than *Lolita*.
- 85 Page 124: The phrase “in our enlightened era “should probably read ”in our [enlightened] era”.
- 86 Page 137: The phrase “he had rather stunned it “should probably read”he had rather [stunted] it”.
- 87 Page 158*: The phrase “on concrete replica“ needs an article: ”on [a] concrete replica”. Martin Amis notes this error when he quotes the sentence in his introduction to the Everyman's edition of *Lolita* (Amis xxi).
- 88 Page 166: The phrase “Reader must understand” needs either an article (“The reader”) or a comma and a personal pronoun (“Reader, you must understand”).
- 89 Page 179: Humbert uses the adjective “golden”, perhaps poetically, instead of the noun “gold”.

- 90 Page 205: The phrase “to take you away the time it takes to pack a suitcase“ should probably read ”to take you away [in] the time it takes to pack a suitcase [...]”.
- 91 Page 223*: In Mona's letter, “to-morrow” is hyphenated erroneously.
- 92 Page 236: The clause “he took rapid chords” contains a dubious verb choice. It should probably read “he [scratched] rapid chords” or “[struck] rapid chords. Could the error be attributed to the proximity of Quilty in the scene? Recall Humbert's poem, which he reads during the execution scene at Pavor Manor: “Because you took advantage of a sinner/because you took advantage/because you took” (299).
- 93 Page 243: The phrase “all were in the plot” should probably read “all were in [on] the plot.”
- 94 Page 252*: The phrase “complicated vague and unprofitable” needs a comma after “complicated”. Humbert frequently omits commas with coordinate adjectives, but the omission is conspicuous here.
- 95 Page 259: In this famous sentence, the phrase “sexual characters” contains an obsolete or archaic use of the word “characters“, according to the *OED*. The word denotes “characteristics“ in this context.
- 96 Page 275*: The sentence ”Dick, with a grin of relief stood up“ is missing a comma after ”relief“.
- 97 Page 275: In the question ”Why do those people guess so much and shave so little, and are so disdainful of hearing aids“, the verbs get tangled and the syntax breaks down.
- 98 Page 286: The phrase ”crouch head forward“ should probably read ”crouch [her] head forward“.
- 99 Page 287: On this page, Humbert substitutes “arrayed” for “arraigned”. The error might be said to suggest Humbert's inadvertent foreknowledge of his manuscript's fate, or perhaps to reflect editorial self-aggrandizement on Ray's part.
- 100 Page 287: G. Edward Grammar's last name is misspelled in Humbert's text. The last name ends with an *-er* in the *New York Times*' coverage of the historical crime (“Perfect Murder”).
- 101 Page 289: Another error surfaces in the name of the other real-world criminal referenced in Humbert's confession. Lasalle is spelled “La Salle” in the *Chicago Tribune*'s initial coverage of the crime (“Girl”).
- 102 Page 291*: The two-word phrase “some time” should be a single word, “sometime”.
- 103 Page 292*: In the phrase “catch engage”, one of the two terms is superfluous. The phrase should probably read either “catch” or “engage”.
- 104 Page 301: The sentence “It was she made me move her” contains what seems to be a non-standard elision: “she [who] made me”. Julian Connolly corrects this mistake automatically (without comment) in his article “Scenes of Reunion and Murder” (Connolly 57).
- 105 Page 307: The phrase “looking forward to surrender myself” should read “looking forward to [surrendering] myself”. The correct gerund form is used later in the sentence. This is a common error in which the infinitive-verb function of *to* is confused with its prepositional function. On page 86, a similar error occurs: “the anything but distracted swimmer was finishing to tread his wife underfoot”. In this construction, the verb “finishing” should also be followed by a gerund, “treading”. But the inelegant

doubling of the gerunds seems to justify Humbert's use of the antiquated construction, his choice of the infinitive “to tread” over the gerund “treading”.

LIST 2: SITES OF EDITORIAL IN(TER)FERENCE

- 106 Page 20: “The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair”.
- 107 Page 25: “Exceptional virility often reflects in the subject's displayable features a sullen and congested something that pertains to what he has to conceal. And this was my case”. The abstract nouns, the arch scientific tone and the mention of the “case” can suggest Ray's presence here.
- 108 Page 40: Humbert's pocket diary is made by the “Blank Blank Co”. in “Blankton, Mass”. Ray could be responsible for the artless masking of the company name and location here, which would confirm his claim in the Foreword that he has suppressed “*a few tenacious details [...] (indicative of places or persons that taste would conceal and compassion spare)*” (3).
- 109 Page 40: “The reader may check the weather data in the Ramsdale *Journal* for 1947”. This sentence echoes Ray's invitation in the Foreword to check the “*daily papers*” for information about Humbert's crime (4). It follows a reference to an outbreak of “abdominal flu” on May 30 in Ramsdale, which forced the town “to close its schools for the summer”. The interjected passage is nonsensical: why would the reader check the “weather data” rather than look for a story that corroborates the outbreak? (And for that matter, why would the outbreak cause the schools to close for the entire summer?) The information that Humbert supplies here—about the “Fast Day” observed in New Hampshire, but not the Carolinas—is likely an attempt to conceal the location of Ramsdale.
- 110 Page 41: “The excess of the oily substance called sebum which nourishes the hair follicles of the skin creates, when too profuse, an irritation that opens the way to infection”. Note how the interjection disrupts the logic of the paragraph: the discussion of acne—“*Sundaes cause acne. [...] But nymphets do not have acne although they gorge themselves on rich food*”—runs more smoothly and clearly without the interruption.
- 111 Page 43: “The median age of pubescence for girls has been found to be thirteen years and nine months in New York and Chicago. The age varies for individuals from ten, or earlier, to seventeen”. The interjection at the start of the paragraph is conspicuously jarring, tonally dissonant. The remainder of the paragraph consists of Humbert's dreamier reflections on Poe; however, the emphasis on ages does blend the two halves of the paragraph together, disguising the interjection.
- 112 Page 60: “The corpuscles of Krause were entering the phase of frenzy”. Between Humbert's laying bare the nerves of pleasure, to paraphrase, and the “least pressure” that would “set all paradise loose”, this comical and clumsy sentence significantly dispels the mood that Humbert is trying to evoke. The passage, consistent with the items noted above, can be read as the contribution of Ray, an interjection not altogether different from the cheerleading of those swimmers who interrupt Humbert and Annabel at the beach: “*Mais allez-y, allez-y!*” (53).

- 113 Page 113: “[...] or at least too childishly subtle for the senior partner to grasp”. This qualification seems to have been supplied by a more knowledgeable expert on such relations.

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the novel are taken from *The Annotated Lolita*.
2. He also bears affinities with that other V., Nabokov himself: both writers have "lovely" families and a flair for the natural sciences ("That in Aleppo Once..." 568).
3. Humbert does occasionally call attention to New England anti-semitism and racial prejudice in his confession, so it's possible to argue that the emphasis on ethnicity in the subtitle reflects an attempt to ingratiate himself with a bigoted audience. And while Humbert makes a joke of his two marriages to Charlotte and Valeria, the subtitle's emphasis on his widowhood might be said to suggest his view of his relations with Lolita: he doesn't become "widowed" in any meaningful sense until Lolita dies, and her death is, of course, a prerequisite for the publication of the

manuscript (308-09). If attributed to Humbert, the bifurcated title would then reflect the split in his character, capturing his obsession with *Lolita*, his inability to concede for her an existence independent from his own, as well as his narcissistic desire to be exonerated for his crimes. However, as I discuss below, the subtitle also evokes the conventions of psychological case studies and of literary pornography (see Appel 19), and because Humbert willfully subverts both genres in his manuscript, a contradiction emerges that makes the subtitle seem suspicious: it appears to reflect Ray's view of the text rather than Humbert's.

4. Some critics argue that the poet-narrator and V. in "Aleppo" exhibit the same kind of identity crisis. See Drescher.

5. Or one such scene. The apotheosis might be said to take place in Coalmont, for example.

6. This title is listed among the library holdings at Cornell University, where Nabokov was teaching when he wrote *Lolita*.

7. It is possible to argue that the correspondences here lend support for Ferger's position regarding the editor's role in Humbert's text. Also, notice that the historical Ray uses the superfluous *c* instead of the indispensable *k* for the phonetic rendering of *q*.

8. In fact, the first of Ray's emendations might arrive on page 19, just prior to the intrusion noted here. The sentence "Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces" might be read as Ray's contribution, an attempt to clarify the obscure reference in Humbert's unforgivably funny declaration, "Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight, and nobody minds." This intrusion is sufficiently problematic to be excluded from consideration in the interest of brevity, but not so problematic as to alter the conclusions in this article. Readers are welcome, of course, to dispute the contents of the present list of John Ray's emendations, in part or as a whole. In the end, the novel might well be engineered to rebuff all attempts to disentangle the real from the illusive, or to separate the identities of Ray and Humbert. This paper argues that these passages might be plausibly attributed to Ray, and pursues the consequences of such a reading.

9. The distinction between the two concepts was, of course, crucial for Nabokov: in his words, "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (*Strong Opinions* 75).

10. An astute reader will note that the title of Darkbloom's biography poses no problem, provided that Quilty's "real" name begins, at least, with the letter *Q*.

11. If we recover a role for Ray in the novel and rely on the text's incongruous dates, it becomes possible to reconcile the positions of Boyd and the illusionist critics.

ABSTRACTS

First identified in 1976, *Lolita*'s calendar problem—the discrepant dates between Humbert's manuscript confession and John Ray's Foreword—remains the most stubborn enigma in the novel. Because the problem hinges on the notion of textual error, and on the reliability of Ray's claim that he has corrected the "obvious solecisms" in Humbert's manuscript, this paper begins by establishing the existence of *Lolita*'s textual errata: a list of thirty-one solecisms appears at the end of the article. While the errata tell us little about the calendar problem, there is additional evidence—woven into the novel's structure and emerging in its connections to "That in Aleppo Once...", Nabokov's 1943 short story—to support the conclusion that Humbert has fabricated much of his confession, and especially its last nine chapters. John Ray's Foreword, then, plays a crucial role in demarcating the boundaries of the "real" in the novel. Still a bumbler and buffoon,

Ray does leave a detectable presence in Humbert's manuscript, a finding that serves to rebut the claim that Ray is Humbert's invention and which necessitates an alternate theory of the "real" in the novel's concluding chapters. The theory outlined in this paper begins to reconcile the text's discrepant dates and posits the innocence of Humbert's victim. Ultimately, the novel is engineered to conceal as much as it reveals, to leave readers with errata and aporia, error and uncertainty—fundamental conditions of Nabokov's aesthetic.

Identifié pour la première fois en 1976, le problème de calendrier de *Lolita*—les dates contradictoires entre la confession manuscrite de Humbert et l'avant-propos de John Ray—reste l'énigme la plus coriace du roman. Parce que le problème est centré sur la notion d'erreur textuelle et sur la fiabilité des affirmations de Ray selon lesquelles ce dernier aurait corrigé "*les solécismes évidents*" du manuscrit d'Humbert, cet article prend comme point de départ la preuve de l'existence d'errata textuels dans *Lolita* : une liste de trente-et-un solécismes figure à la fin de l'article. Alors que les errata ne nous révèlent que peu de choses sur le problème de calendrier, il existe une preuve supplémentaire—tissée dans la structure du roman et qui émerge dans ses liens avec "That in Aleppo Once...", la nouvelle écrite en 1943—qui conforte la thèse selon laquelle Humbert a fabriqué une bonne partie de sa confession, et surtout ses neuf derniers chapitres. Dès lors, l'avant-propos de Ray joue un rôle crucial dans la démarcation des limites du "vrai" dans le roman. Toujours cafoilleur et bouffon, Ray laisse des traces clairement identifiables dans le manuscrit de Humbert, ce qui sert à réfuter la thèse selon laquelle Ray n'est que l'invention d'Humbert, et fait émerger la nécessité d'une théorie alternative du "vrai" dans les derniers chapitres du roman. La théorie esquissée dans cet article pose les jalons d'une réconciliation des dates contradictoires du texte et avance l'innocence de la victime d'Humbert. Finalement, le roman est organisé pour dissimuler autant qu'il révèle, léguant ainsi aux lecteurs errata et apories, erreur et incertitude—les bases mêmes de l'esthétique de Nabokov.

INDEX

Mots-clés: *Lolita*, chronologie, errata, aporie, narration, vrai, imaginaire, stylistique, Aleppo

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